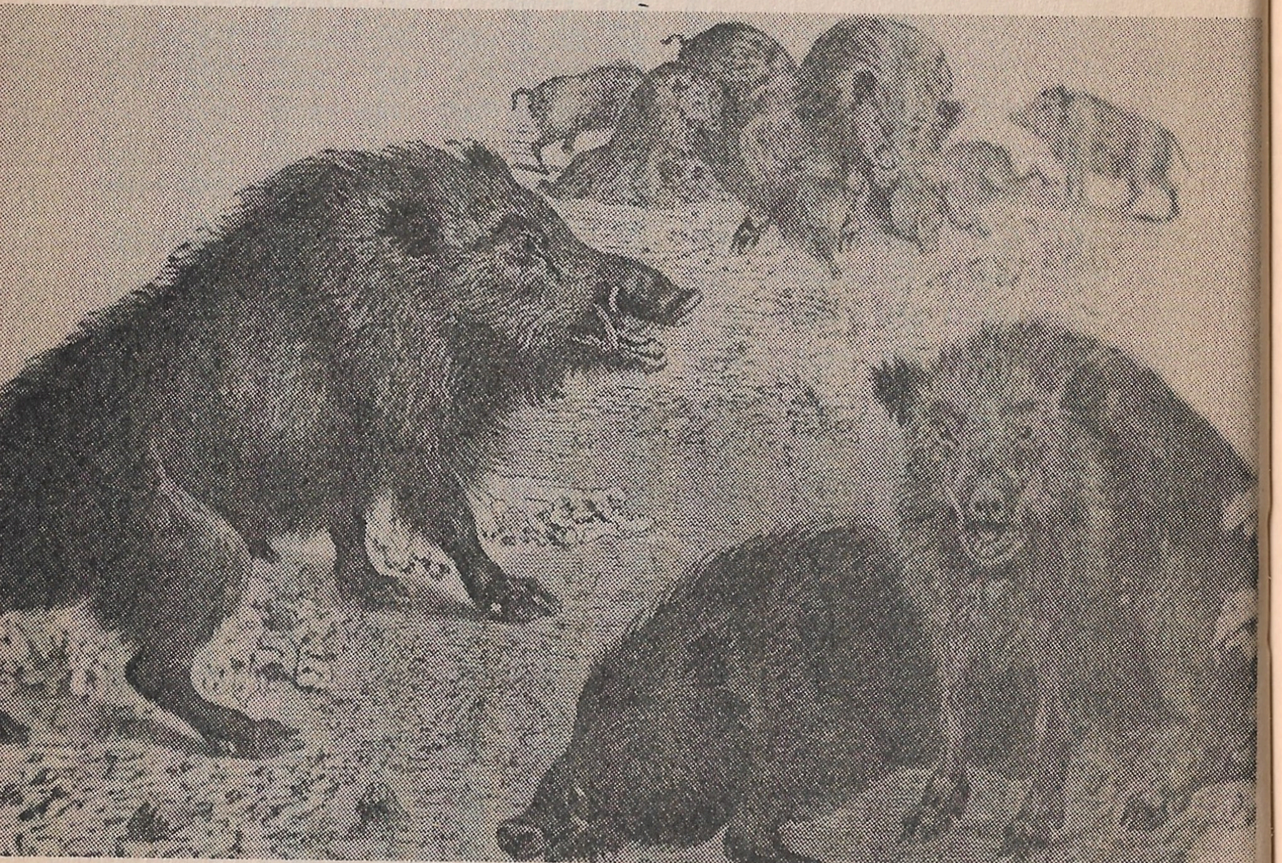
MYSTERIOUS RETURN OF BRITAIN'S WILD BOAR

How can a tough, ill-tempered and dangerous animal become extinct — and then suddenly reappear centuries later?

By Michael Goss

AT 2:30 A.M. on January 25, 1980, peculiar rummaging sounds drew David and Dezree Jones to the window of their house on Shakespeare Avenue in Langdon Hills, a suburb of the southeast Essex, England, town of Basildon. When they looked outside, they saw a strange animal destroying their garden.

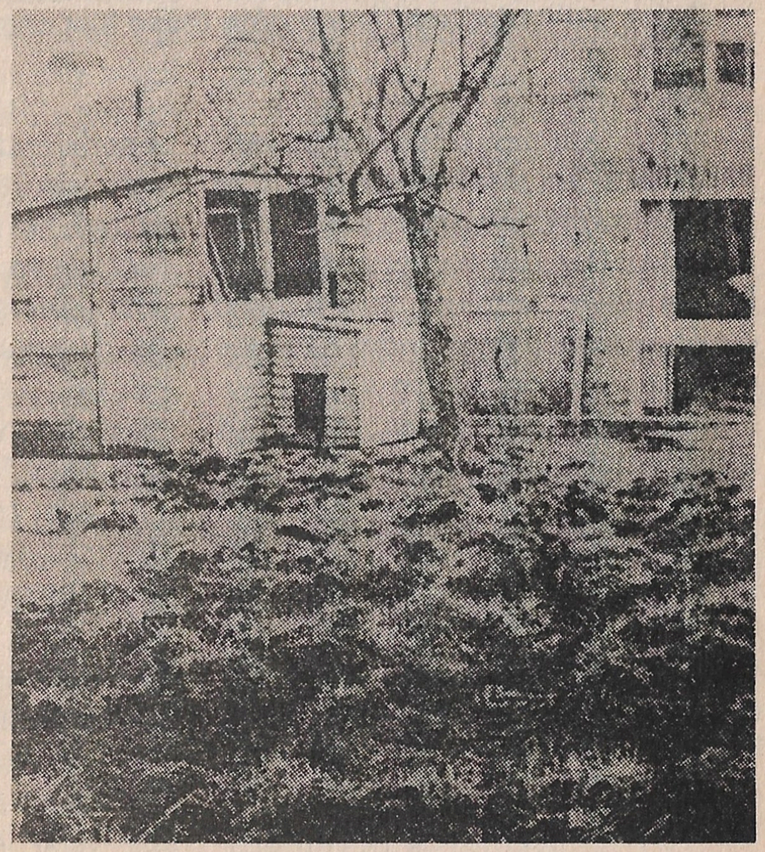


Britain's wild boars were feared for their attacks on human beings and the men who killed them were celebrated as heroes. As forests disappeared from the landscape, the animals lost their natural habitat.

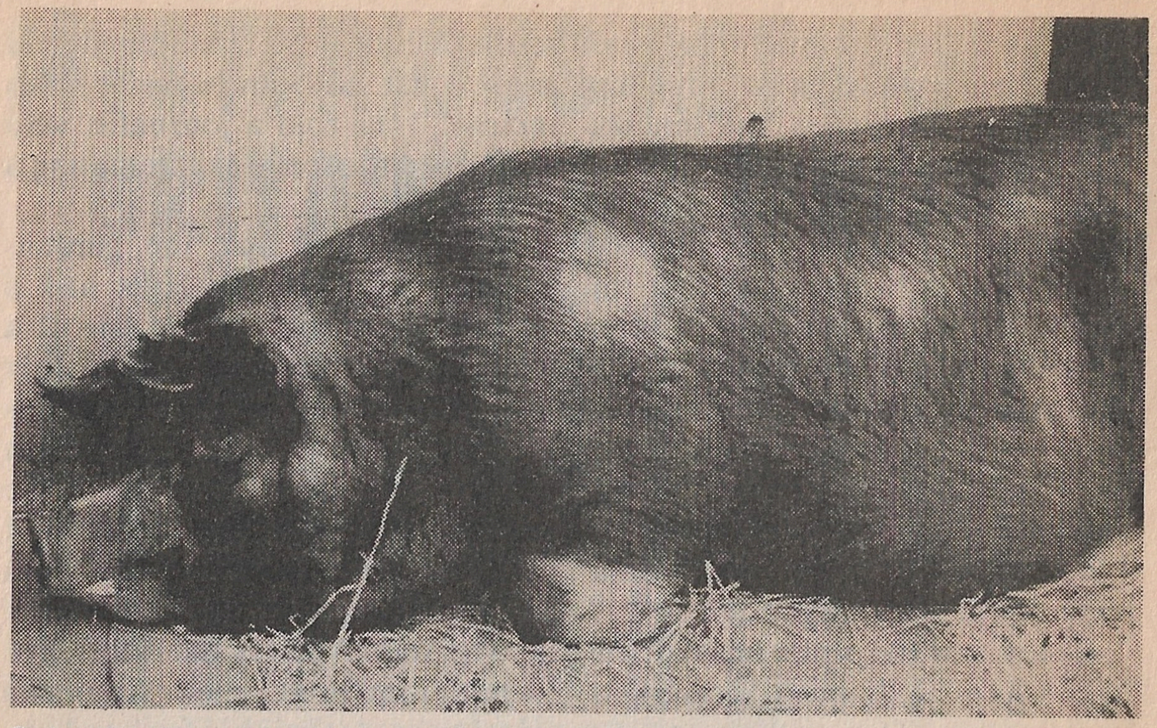
Having been aware for several weeks that something was digging up their lavish garden, the Joneses were half-expecting to see one or more badgers. The shape outside their window, though, was definitely not that of a badger. "At first we didn't know what it was," Mrs. Jones confessed afterwards to the *Basildon Evening Echo*. "Then we realized that it had a snout like a pig's and must be a boar. . . . It's absolutely huge and quite terrifying. I would hate to think what would happen if it did charge."

By the time the police arrived, the boar was gone, leaving devastation in its wake. "Our garden cost us quite a lot to be landscaped and now it has all been ruined by this animal," she told a journalist who described the scene as resembling a "battlefield."

As it turned out, the garden-wrecker of Langdon Hills had a human custodian. It was one of a trio that had escaped around July 31, 1978, from the appropriately-named Frank's Farm at Cranham about seven miles to the east. (The name is "appropriate" because it hails from the time when wild boars enjoyed a measure of conservation as a huntable species and were fed in winter from forest pens or "franks.") Having made their bid for freedom,



David and Dezree Jones' elegant garden in Langdon Hills, Essex, was destroyed by an "absolutely huge and quite terrifying" boar. A reporter described the garden as resembling a "battlefield."



Selective breeding has removed all but a few traces of the domestic pig's wild-boar ancestry such as the dark coloration. Some authorities believe feral domestics "revert" and regain these lost characteristics.

two of the animals trekked eastward and made themselves at home in one of the few remaining havens for wildlife left in this corner of Essex: a belt of open farmland with natural cover, hemmed on all sides by some of the most heavily-built-up, highly-populated urban areas in all of southeastern England.

One of the pair was seen several times in the village of Horndon-on-the-Hill not long after the July escape. Kathleen Moss said it "came right up to my back door and snorted at me" after eating apples that had fallen in her garden. Anthony Smith, a pig farmer no less, saw it on the edge of nearby woods and called it a "young boar with short tusks" which, he predicted, "will take some catching." In fact the animal wasn't caught at all. The papers focused their attention on its erstwhile companion which had taken up a residency permanent enough to warrant the name "Basildon boar."

"Calls from all over town" — from Long Riding, Rantree Fold, the Kingswood estate, the golf club and Vange Hill Drive — had police marksmen hurrying down the A-roads from Chelmsford. A boar loose in a large town whose chief pride is its shopping precinct was a matter to be taken seriously, especially when (as Betty Lee said after being forced to swerve her car to miss it) the species had a reputation for pugnacity "and could hurt children."

Loudspeakers warned the public not to approach the boar. A spokesman for the London Zoo underlined the message by remarking that the animals "are vicious and, if fully grown and male, can be particularly nasty. Anyone who sees it should keep their distance."

Over the next eight to 10 days there were sporadic reports which implied the animal was heading westward and perhaps homeward. And then all went silent. How or where the boar spent the intervening 17 months is not known but the next that was heard of it was when the Joneses' Langdon Hills garden received its unwelcome night visitor.

The marksmen returned but again had no luck in the hunt. By March 1, 1980, the police were prepared to concede defeat. "Essex Police do not possess any equipment or the manpower trained specifically to hunt wild animals," the press statement said. "The wild boar is undoubtedly a nuisance but the police can no longer afford to deploy officers in an attempt to get rid of it."

As if to celebrate its triumph, on June 12 the animal trotted across a road in Langdon Hills in front of a patrolling police car, smashed its way through a five-bar gate and disappeared into a field. The officers said they were "somewhat surprised" at all this.

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JOHN DYNE owned a house in Langdon Hills just around the corner from the Joneses' ravaged back garden. Returning from vacation, he and his wife noticed some curious signs of activity about their premises: long grass had been squashed flat as if by a heavy body "and there were little bits dug up here and there down to six inches. One morning we found the garden had been dug up all over the shop."

In due course the Dynes were to see the cause of the trouble. Mrs. Dyne caught sight of it standing in a field 50 yards away and looking not much smaller than the pony next to it. And one night at about 12:30 her husband was contemplating the familiar layout of his garden from a window when he spotted "a blob of black where no blob should be." He aimed a powerful flashlight on the alien patch of darkness "and it was the boar, of course." Dyne had not been able to understand how the creature found its way into his garden despite the thick hedge that fenced his property off from the vacant land behind; now he knew. The moment the light fell on the boar, "it turned and went straight through the hedge as if it wasn't there."

A third visit from what the *Evening Echo* for October 10, 1980,

dubbed "the notorious boar that digs up gardens in the dead of night" left plants uprooted and "what looks like a crater about 10 feet across." Feeling he had put up with enough, Dyne appealed to the police for help. They responded by bringing in the Chelmsford marksmen's unit. Not everyone was happy with this development; there were calls to try to bring the beast to heel with a tranquilizer gun, but Basildon Zoo's Bob Hands observed that in the 10 to 15 minutes it would require the drug to work the boar would have vanished without a trace. "Shooting it," he declared, "is the only way."

Two marksmen took up their station in Dyne's garden shed and waited. For three consecutive nights they waited but the animal that had seemed almost a fixity around the place didn't favor them with an appearance. "Perhaps," Dyne reflected when we spoke over the phone, "he smelt that there was something in the wind." Dyne told me of a few more possible sightings made before the Basildon boar vanished. Dyne thought it may have died eventually in the dense, bushy country around Langdon Hills. Then again, for all I know, it might be happily rooting away there still. Unless it takes to invading gardens again, we may never find out for certain.

What *is* certain is that animals identified as wild boars have been seen — and made thorough pests of themselves — in various parts of the country long after British zoologists had consigned them to the "dead" file alongside dinosaur and dodo. And not merely around Essex either. In 1972 Hampshire experienced a surfeit of wild boars from nowhere and this time with no owners to take the responsibility for them.

Undefined reports of a "strange animal" had been circulating in the Hook/Odiham/Hartley/Wintney area during the summer of that year but the fun really began around 9:30 P.M. on August 5 when Detective Constable Bernard Startup was called on to deal with a boar that was eating young fir trees in an Odiham front garden. The 200-pound animal was captured and tranquilized after a lively chase and was taken off to Marwell Zoo while police began the search to locate whatever menagerie or private collector had mislaid it. Their efforts were unrewarded.

Five days later police and their track dogs went after "a big black animal" like a boar that a woman saw running into the woods at Up Nately near Odiham. The trail led to the banks of a canal but the animal that had left it could not be found.

On the morning of the 16th, also at Odiham, a man cycling to work saw "a funny-looking pig" in a field with some horses at North Wanborough. "It had a long tail with a sort of tassel on the end of it and it was dark gray with a kind of pointed head," the witness said. Once again the animal ran into some adjacent woods and once again the police couldn't find it.

A couple of weeks afterwards Frederick Ratky of Moor Place Farm, Bramshill, had better luck. On September 2, out hunting a fallow deer buck which had been damaging his crops, he shot an unusual animal which was feeding in a barley field. The victim turned out to be a wild sow.

None of these anomalous boars could be credited with (or blamed on) an owner. Nor, so far as I know, did anyone claim the yearling boar killed by a vehicle on a forestry road at Nairn, Scotland, in 1976; the only ones for 40 miles around were safely under lock and key at the Highland Wildlife Park. You do not have to be a dedicated Fortean to agree that when animals believed to have been centuries extinct start to appear at unrelated places around a country there ought to be some explanation.

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THE WILD BOAR (*Sus scrofa*) was among the oldest and most powerful of native British animals and its mighty image has been preserved in the artworks of ancient Briton, Roman and Celt through to medieval times. Besides being commemorated in some English, Scottish and Irish place names, it was regarded as the prime beast of the chase and for hundreds of years represented the ultimate opponent, one against which it took naked courage as well as skill, woodcraft and good organization.

Hunting the boar was, in the words of one medieval historian, "a verie dangerous exercise." When mood or nature's dictates move it, *Sus scrofa* can be a terribly destructive neighbor and according to traditional tales the horrors of a ravaged garden were nothing to what our ancestors suffered — in those far-off days *whole districts* might be ravaged.

In this respect the pleasures that the chase brought a privileged few were accompanied by a kind of social duty; the nobleman played his part by culling wild beasts which jeopardized the community. Unlike wolf or bear, the boar did not pose a threat to livestock in the normal predatory way but it competed for food with domestic pigs (which until quite recently were provisioned simply by turning them out into the forest to forage for themselves). It also ate crops and on occasion went far beyond that. A large and especially aggressive specimen might become the demon of the district, bringing traffic to a standstill and endangering human life.

The man who killed the district's wild boar was regarded as a local hero and fit subject for legend: no less so than the dragon-slayers of

universal fame. Across the British Isles there are or were several families that traced their rise in fortune from lands granted to an ancestor in recognition of his having killed some notorious wild boar.

The British boar declined as feudalism declined. To be hunted periodically, *Sus scrofa* had to be given a measure of protection; that is why those franks were built in the woods to insure it had food enough to be available for the chase next year. As the large uncultivated estates characteristic of feudalism became fewer, so the animal itself became an anomaly. Private game preserves did not go with arable farming, which meant deforestation. Swineherds who pastured their hogs in the open woodland regarded the wild variety as a competitor, an "unproductive" animal, and they probably took surreptitious steps against it.

The date at which *Sus scrofa* surrendered its British tenancy is not known but it was already rare in the south by the late 16th Century and was most likely confined elsewhere to gentlemen's estates. Vulnerable to all the perils of inbreeding and disease, the species had not much time left. The last written record of wild boar is a 1683 entry in the Steward of Charnley Manor's accounts book — two shillings paid "for a paile for ye old swine": a sorry valediction on an ancient native species.

For some time prior to this there had been attempts to reinstate the animal but they were as unappreciated as they were unsuccessful — mainly because the gentry involved saw only the boar's potential as a thing to hunt whereas the locals saw it as a damnable crop-spoiling nuisance. Some German boars were brought to the New Forest in Hampshire by Charles I for his diversion; they "much increased and became terrible to travelers" but were "slaughtered during the licence of the Civil War."

In the 17th Century John Evelyn sent a breeding Portuguese pair to Wotton, Surrey, where they "greatly increased; but they digged the earth so up, and did so much spoyle, that the country would not endure it." Small consolation to the boars but much to Evelyn, "they made capital bacon."

There was no place for the boar in Britain, it seemed. When General Howe released some imported German boars into the woods of Wolmer and Alice Holt, according to Gilbert White, "the country rose upon them and destroyed them." Even without human interference the animals did poorly. Four *Sus scrofa* released on Sir Francis Darwin's 200-acre wooded estate at Sydnope, Derbyshire, bred quite well but the progeny were stunted and spiritless creatures which would probably have degenerated still further had not the Darwins decided to

shoot the last in 1837. About two years later Mr. Drax of Charlborough Park, Dorset, had problems with the two pairs (one French, one Russian) he kept inside a fenced wood for shooting purposes; they were "so savage and troublesome . . . to keep within bounds" that he killed them.

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A CORRESPONDENT bothered by all these reports of anomalous British boars wrote to the resident experts of *BBC Wildlife* (July 1986) to ask what was going on. "Surely the animal is extinct in this country?" he pleaded plaintively. Panelist Clin Keeling assured the writer that it was but went on to explain the origin of the "extinct" animals that the press kept noticing.

The wild boar, he said, had enjoyed a sudden vogue from the 1960's onwards when "all manner of unlikely people" began to acquire them: farmers who wanted to cross-breed them with their domestic hogs, "trend-setting pet keepers and even hotel and restaurant owners." The demand and the trade persist, although on a smaller scale, and from time to time an individual will escape and establish itself in the countryside.

The matter, however, does not end there. *Domestic* pigs also escape and establish themselves, reverting over several generations to a physical form resembling that of their ancestor, the wild boar. They become more slender and the bristly coat thickens. In other words, they become more boarlike.

So there are two possible answers to the question of how Britain has magically regained a native species that it lost some 300 years ago. The anomalous animals *may* be escaped wild boars, imported but genuine examples of *Sus scrofa*. They *may* be feral domestic pigs which have reverted to mimic their wild ancestors. We may as well throw in a third possibility: the beasts could be hybrids, crosses between *Sus scrofa* and the domestic hog.

In fact, hybrid hogs have been on the scene and confusing the issue for hundreds of years. In his *Natural History of Wiltshire* (1698) John Aubrey wrote that before their destruction, the animals King Charles had placed in the New Forest had time to taint "all the breeds of pigges in the neighbouring partes, which are of their colour; a kind of soot colour." That is, interbreeding produced a race whose traits favored the wild stock and may have rendered the two almost indistinguishable.

Repeated attempts to reintroduce the wild boar to the New Forest would have augmented the process. In 1786, some time after selective breeding had forged a distinction between the appearances of domestic and wild animals, Gilpin remarked that "at this day" the New Forest was inhabited by "a breed of

hogs, commonly called forest pigs, which are very different from the usual Hampshire breed and have about them several of the characteristics of the Wild Boar." This New Forest breed may have survived to within living memory; at any rate, an animal of this description was shot by a man named Bennett sometime between 1880 and 1914. A "wild boar, but not of British ancestry," says Anthony Dent in *The Lost Beasts of Britain*, and probably the last of its kind.

Interbreeding between domestic and wild pigs was inevitable until husbandry practices changed — or until there were no more wild boars left for the domestics to breed with. Driven out to forage in the woods and penned only during the harshest months of winter, man's hogs had plenty of opportunity to meet and mate with their wild cousins.

In any case, an intimate kinship existed between the two: all original breeds of British domestic pig were descended from wild-boar populations and (unsurprisingly) looked like them. This only sounds strange because no two creatures today seem less alike than the lean, rough-haired and tuft-tailed boar and the plump farmyard creature with its vestigial hair and inclined-to-curl tail. But British hogs did not look like that in the beginning. It took years of selective breeding (with emphasis on increased girth) to transform them, physically as well as temperamentally, from something close to what their forest progenitors had been.

Returned to a natural environment, a pig will recover some of its lost traits — especially if its breeding hasn't outlawed the original wild-boar genes or if its ancestors themselves were hybrid animals. Even at comparatively early dates the pigs' biological quirks made it hard to decide what an observer meant when he referred to a "wild boar." R.S.R. Fitter, an authority on naturalized animals, thinks that toward the end of its British career *Sus scrofa* was no longer a purebred race; "the population," he writes, "must have been a very mixed one, by constant interbreeding with escaped domestic pigs." And those gone-wild animals could sometimes pass effortlessly for the real *Sus scrofa*.

Still, when a Basildon lady says she saw a wild boar run in front of her car, we tend to suppose she *meant* a wild boar and not some degenerate pig which looked a bit like one. After all, *Sus scrofa* is a fairly unmistakable sight: long snout, dark brown-to-black coat and stiff crestlike mane, elegantly slender legs and straight, tufted tail give it an appearance unlike that of any denizen of the farmyard sty. Certainly no sty dweller ever displayed such cruel, upwardly thrusting tusks, honed to razor-sharpness against the upper canines.

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There have been enough escapes to make it possible that at least some witnesses are seeing real wild boars. The rest apparently are encountering feral domestics, reverts and hybrids close enough to *Sus scrofa* to fool all but an expert.

And Britain could be getting more. Writing in *The Times* for August 15, 1986, Peter Hill produced "evidence of keen interest" among farmers who want to breed wild boar in remote parts of the country because wild pork commands a healthy price in the marketplace. Eddie Orbell, director of the Highland Wildlife Park which has a breeding pair of these animals, said he has received dozens of requests "from people interested in acquiring stock to be bred for the table." Dr. Bertram of the London Zoo also has been on the receiving end of similar inquiries. One way or another, the United Kingdom may be hearing much more of the boar.

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A DEVILISH PHONE NUMBER

By George W. Earley

WHEN JOHN DiGirolamo began his real estate business in Newington, Conn., about 15 years ago, he wanted a name for it that would be easier to remember than his own. He thought of Father Damien, the 19th-Century priest who devoted his life to the lepers on Molokai Island and was beatified, and named his firm Damien Realty, Inc. He also picked an easy-to-remember phone number: 666-6666.

All went well until Hollywood released *The Omen,* with its villain the demon-possessed infant Damien whose scalp bore the numbers "666." In Revelation 13:18, 666 is called the mark of the beast.

Damien Realty began to get phone calls — lots of phone calls. People — mainly youngsters, some of whom even called long-distance collect — wanted to speak to Damien, the devil. DiGirolamo got so many calls his answering service canceled his contract.

De Girolamo told *Hartford Courant* columnist Irving Kravsow that the kids "said they wanted to talk to the devil and got angry and threatening when they were told Damien didn't live here."

The calls finally tapered off, only to start in even greater number when Damien's *Omen II* was released. In time, these calls too ended. Then came *The Final Conflict,* the third Damien movie, and Damien Realty's phone lines lit up again. By then DiGirolamo had had enough. He called the phone company and gave up his easy-to remember but devilish phone number.

Ma Bell doesn't waste numbers. If you dial 666-6666 today, you'll get the Yellow Cab Company in Bloomfield — and don't ask if there is a driver named Damien.